

Boundary Conditions: Looking Without Seeing

Thesis

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By

Mark Thongchai Kovitya, B.F.A.
Undergraduate Program in Sculpture

The Ohio State University

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Thesis Committee:

Carmel Buckley, Advisor

Todd Slaughter

Dani Leventhal

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Abstract

Investigation of the basis for prevailing attitudes towards vulnerable populations within the context of the global refugee crisis occurring in the mid to late 2010's. The formal, conceptual, cultural, and material concerns considered in the creation of the art work *There, There (Culling Comfort)* and how these attributes reflect contemporary and historical attitudes as viewed through the lens of personal experience are examined. A range of strategies contemporary artists have employed to engage with related issues to achieve similar ends are also explored.

Vita

1996 Lancaster High School

2001 B.S. Aerospace Engineering, The Ohio State University

2015 *SculptureX Symposium Exhibition*, Whitdel Arts, Detroit MI

2015 *Fuse Factory's Interventions*, Conard Gallery, Mansfield OH

2015 *New School*, MINT Gallery, Columbus OH

2015 *SHIFT: yaw*, Ease Gallery, Columbus OH

2015 *Small Works*, ROY G BIV Gallery, Columbus OH

2016 *New School 2*, Pearl Conard Art Gallery, Mansfield OH

2016 *Undergraduate Scholarship Exhibition*, Columbus OH

2016 *John Fergus Scholarship Exhibition*, Columbus OH

2016 *ImageOHIO 16*, Shot Tower Gallery, Columbus OH

2016 *Adult Human*, Second Sight Project, Columbus OH

2016 *Junk Dada Community Sculpture*, Wexner Center, Columbus

2016 *Aida Cannarsa Snow Endowment*

2016 *John Fergus Family Scholarship*

2016 *COMPAS Inequality Art Contest – Award of Excellence*

2016 *Ohio State University Arts Undergraduate Research Grant*

2016 *The Ohio State University Art Department Faculty/Staff Award*

2017 *Undergraduate Scholarship Exhibition*, Columbus OH

2017 *John Fergus Scholarship Exhibition*, Columbus OH

2017 *ImageOHIO 17*, Shot Tower Gallery, Columbus OH

2017 *Aida Cannarsa Snow Endowment*
2017 *John Fergus Family Scholarship*
2013 – 17 Student, Sculpture Department, Ohio State University

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Fine Arts – Sculpture

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Chapter 1: Comfortable with Comfort

Citizens of economically advantaged nations avert their attention and resources from the suffering of disadvantaged populations so as not to endanger a level of comfort, both psychological and physiological, with which they have come to expect. Borrowing from the conceptual underpinnings of “Americana”, I wish to compel viewers to recognize ways in which they knowingly or unknowingly dissociate from issues threatening to their sense of comfort. Referencing the refugee crisis of the mid to late 2010's, and employing similar strategies as artists Robert Gober and Mona Hatoum, I intend to instill vulnerability and suffering into the safety of the domestic as a way of seeing beyond positions of privilege.

New York Times reporter Liz Alderman has noted, “Over a third of refugees in Greece are children, and despite covering the crisis since it started, I was struck by how many babies were still being born in the camps. One Afghan mother shyly held up her newborn, and gestured that another was on the way” (Alderman, 2017). What does growing up under such conditions do to one's perspective of world? Experience in these formative years must have long lasting effects on one's view of right and wrong, possible and impossible, life and death. I began work on *There, There (Culling Comfort)* with these questions in mind.

There, There (Culling Comfort) is an art installation consisting of several nursery elements including a bassinet, an infant swing, a baby

gym, and a playpen. Each element is composed primarily of wood, however, materials that can be found in refugee camps are also incorporated. Taught barbed wire creates the sides of the bassinet, keeping its occupant protected from outside influence. On the base of the bassinet, where bedding typically resides, earth is heaped in a pile resembling a burial mound. When the cradle is gently rocked, soil spills through the barbed wire sides to the floor below. A playpen is situated behind the bassinet, a woven mesh of barbed wire conscripted for walls. A solitary blue rubber ball rests on the playpen's padded, blue tarp floor. Adjacent the bassinet and playpen, a baby gym is set over a bed of stones. Wooden geometric shapes hang from barbed wire to distract or amuse an infant playing beneath the gym. Lastly, an infant swing floats next to the bassinet, a blue tarpaulin harness suspended from the ceiling by barbed wire guides.



Figure 1. *There, There (Culling Comfort)*

Wood, barbed wire, earth, stones, tarp, rubber ball

Chapter 2: Refugees

In 2015 the world witnessed “the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.3 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18” (“Figures,” 2017). Almost 5 million of this record number are composed of refugees fleeing a seven year war being waged in Syria with United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees Filippo Grandi stating, “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world” (“Figures,” 2017; “Syria,” 2017).

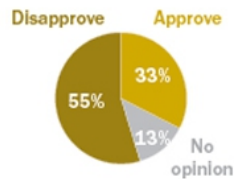
However, this groundswell of support seems not to have materialized and in fact, recent attempts have been made by the United States government to vaporize existing support for hosting refugees (Vogue, 2017). It could be argued that such actions do not reflect the views of the United States citizenry but historically, citizens of the United States have generally taken an unfavorable view of refugee immigration. According to a Pew Research Center study conducted in October 2016, “54% of registered voters said the U.S. does not have a responsibility to accept refugees from Syria” (Krogstad, 2017).

Over the Decades, American Public Generally Hasn't Welcomed Refugees

% who say ...

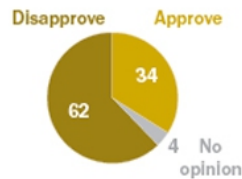
Hungarians, 1958

Would you approve or disapprove of a plan to permit 65,000 refugees who escaped the Communist regime in Hungary to come to the U.S.?



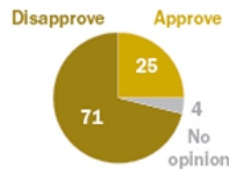
Indochinese, 1979

Do you approve or disapprove of the U.S. gov't's plan to double the number of refugees from Indochina admitted, to 14,000 a month?



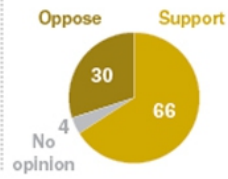
Cubans, 1980

Many refugees from Cuba have come to the U.S. recently. Do you approve or disapprove of allowing most of these Cuban refugees to settle in the U.S.?



Ethnic Albanians, 1999

Several hundred ethnic Albanian refugees from Kosovo have been brought to the U.S. Do you support or oppose the decision to bring them here?



Source: Gallup (Hungarians, July-August 1958; Albanians, May 1999)
CBS/New York Times (Indochinese, July 1979; Cubans, June 1980)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2. Hosting Refugees

(Krogstad, 2017)

What possible reasons bring about an attitude in which human beings in an advantageous position would deprive suffering human beings an equal or similar standard of living. One possibility is that citizens in advantageous positions are unaware of the conditions under which the disadvantaged live. In the case of the recent refugee crisis, the argument of absolute ignorance of these conditions seems to stretch credulity for anyone who has either glanced at an online news outlet or watched a televised news segment. It is not uncommon to come across images produced and widely distributed by organizations like *Getty Images* which graphically illustrate the misery of these environments.



Figure 3. Refugee Camp, Aleppo, Syria
(Cicek, 2014)

America's seeming reticence to offer assistance to the vulnerable could stem from any number of reasons. In the following chapter I will look at the concept of *Americana* and the myth of self-reliance and consumer nationalism to illuminate some of the possible factors contributing to this perspective.

Chapter 3: *Americana*

Americana has traditionally been defined as, “materials concerning or characteristic of America, its civilization, or its culture; things typical of America”, while the periodical *The Atlantic* characterizes *Americana* as “slang for the comforting, middle-class ephemera at your average antique store – things like needle-pointed pillows, Civil War daguerreotypes, and engraved silverware sets” (“Americana,” 2017; Russonello, 2013). Using these definitions as a framework, I extend *Americana* to encompass the spirit of a shared cultural heritage symbolized in cultural artifacts or activities which substitute for America's lack of shared ethnic national identity and is often used to perpetuate a sense of nationalism. Furthermore, this nationalism is a type of materialistic, consumer based nationalism that holds self-reliance as a guiding tenet.

When President Donald Trump campaigned on the platform “Make America Great Again”, he employed a revisionist and fictitious narrative which coincides nicely with the concept of *Americana*. “Making America Great” is the spirit of *Americana*, the concept of an exceptional nation projected onto material objects it either appropriates or creates. In turn, these artifacts are used to evangelize for the greatness of the nation – a patriotic perpetual propaganda machine.

Turning once again to possibilities for why citizens of the United States may not wish to assist disadvantaged populations; perhaps

Americans fail to perceive suffering but see weakness instead. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey reports, 75% of Americans believe they can succeed on their own compared to just 19% who believe outside forces determine success. “Success through hard work is a bedrock American value. And there is a strong belief that the individual has the power to shape their own future” (Clark, 2012).

Individualism, Hard Work Core American Values

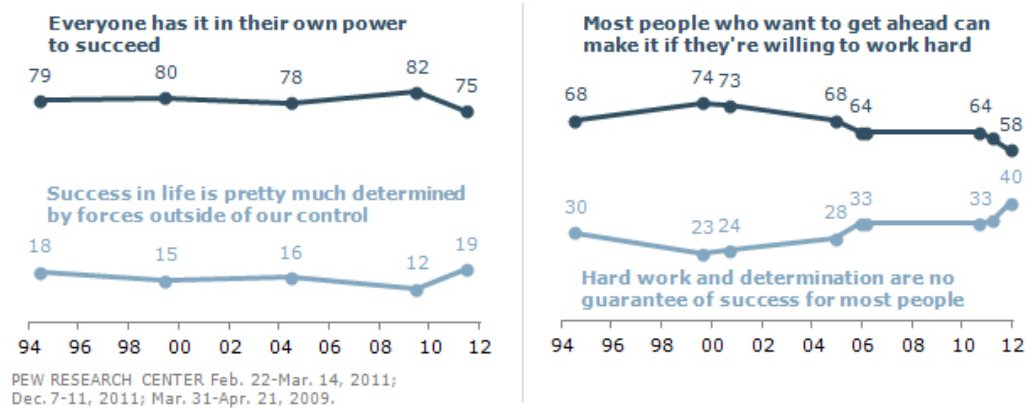


Figure 4. American Values (Clark, 2012)

American-Western Europe Gap on Views of State, Individualism

Success in life is determined by forces outside our control

	Agree %	Disagree %	DK %
U.S.	36	62	3
Britain	41	55	4
Spain	50	47	3
France	57	43	0
Germany	72	27	1

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Global Attitudes Project, Spring 2011.

Figure 5. Determinant of Success (Clark, 2012)

The United States manufactures *Americana* through subsuming cultural artifacts of the populations it marginalizes. This can be seen in common idioms like, “American as apple pie” which was brought to the New World by the British, Dutch, and Swedes, or “American as baseball” which according to historian David Block, has its roots in the English game of *stoolball* (“Apple,” 2017; “Bullpen,” 2017). Yet another misleading idiom posits that jazz is, “the only true American art form”, no matter how greatly indebted it is to the contributions of Africans. There exists a long history of American wood furniture making which has spanned more than ten stylistic periods since 1640 (“The Twelve,” 2017). I contend handmade furniture making has also been subsumed by the canon of *Americana* and in exploring the form of *There, There (Culling Comfort)*, I was searching to evoke these very characteristics signified by a mythologized middle-class America.

Chapter 4: Robert Gober and Mona Hatoum

Robert Gober engages with a dual conflict; domestic comfort for some and brutal realities for others. In *Sleeping Man Hanging Man*, Gober created wallpaper for hanging both in private homes and within his installations. The wallpaper exhibits a pattern of two alternating images. The first image depicts a caucasian man lying on his stomach, soundly asleep, tucked comfortably into bed. The contrasting image is of a black man, lynched, hanging lifeless from a tree while anxious birds hover in the background, patiently awaiting their next meal. In these images, Gober's marks appear child-like, the lines resembling marks left by children's crayons.

What particularly interests me in this work is Gober's juxtaposition of two simultaneous realities. In a world that is more empathetic, perhaps one would sleep less comfortably knowing that the cruelty of lynchings or even smaller, insidious structural inequalities persist. In pursuit of a restful night's sleep, one's attentions are often averted from suffering that is not one's own. Using wallpaper as a substrate, Gober injects uncomfortable ideas into the domestic sphere, delivering issues which may appear distant into the dining room. In *There There (Culling Comfort)* I similarly wish to confront our less than sympathetic attitudes towards remote suffering but using nursery furniture as my substrate for localizing these concerns domestically.



Figure 6. *Sleeping Man Hanging Man Wallpaper*

Robert Gober, 1989

Screenprint on wallpaper, height variable x 75.9 cm

("Sleeping Man," 2017)

Mona Hatoum uses similar tactics to squeeze oversized issues into the domestic sphere. Hatoum's *Incommunicado* is a metal infant cot, stripped of all padding. Cylindrical metal bars surround all four sides of the cot, invoking a sense of incarceration. At the cot's base, where a child would rest, instead of soft bedding, sharp metal cheese wires are installed.



Figure 7. *Incommunicado*

Mona Hatoum, 1993

Metal Cot and Wire 1264 x 575 x 935 mm

(*"Incommunicado,"* 2017)

Hatoum subverts what is typically a comforting piece of nursery furniture and imbues it with a quality of penitentiary and torture. A location of safety and sleep is transformed into one of involuntary containment and danger. The title *Incomunicado* may suggest that each day, people are born into dangerous environments, where little sense of comfort exists, and where their voices are not likely to be heard. Hatoum brings this vicious reality into the light of the everyday.

All of the nursery furniture in *There There (Culling Comfort)* is intended to rock, swing, cradle, amuse or otherwise comfort. Comfort is a condition that, as privileged Americans, and in contrast to many other nations, we exist in regardless of class. This foreshadows another possible reason why citizen's of the U.S. seem loath to help raise the standard of living of the vulnerable — Americans may not perceive themselves as privileged, but as disadvantaged themselves. A Pew Research Center survey shows 84% of Americans identify as either lower or middle class (excluding upper-middle class) (Kochhar, 2014). Such views dovetail nicely with the *Americana* ethos which posits if you own the rags, the riches are forthcoming.

Individuals believing their existing comforts are meager to begin with are unlikely to have the inclination to improve the comfort of others before their own. So like Hatoum, I wish to destabilize comfort by overlaying vulnerability onto domesticity. Contrasting handmade nursery furniture with materials often seen in refugee camps, including barbed wire, blue tarpaulin, stone and earth, I create a dissonance between two manners of existence; the *There* of the refugee camp and the *There* of *Americana*, the mythical American household.

Chapter 5: Boundaries Both Visible and Not

There is a type of image that seems to be quite common as of late. It is of children playing in streets and shelters of various annihilated cities and refugee camps. My earliest memories were not of sharp, dangerous objects, open exposure to the elements, and instability — but of safety, reassurance, comfort and protection. It returns me to the question I initially considered here. How is one's perspective of the world shaped by the trauma or stability experienced in these formative years?



Figure 8. Camp Swing
("Barbed Wire," 2017)

As a teenager I visited relatives in Thailand and having grown up in suburban middle-class America, I was struck by how people in other parts of the world lived under corrugated metal roofs with dirt floors and no walls. Furthermore, others with greater means lived in homes enclosed within high walls, these barriers adorned with broken shards of irregularly shaped, multicolored glass.

Thailand is a majority Buddhist nation and I cannot help but think of the Buddhist myth of the Four Sights. In this myth, the Buddha's father builds an opulent palace whose walls deny his son knowledge of the greater world. After almost three decades of life, the Buddha is finally permitted to breach the palace walls, and to his dismay — but ultimate benefit — he discovers the suffering brought on by death, sickness and aging (“Four sights,” 2017).



Figure 9. Glass Topped Wall Protects Residence (“Day 2,” 2012)

Playing hide and seek as a child, closing your eyes helps you hide, it makes the hider invisible to the seeker. As adults, attention is averted from the unfortunate, the disagreeable, and these maladies become invisible. But like the hiding child, with eyelids clenched shut, these tactics do not actually initiate the erasure of problems.

In *Sleeping Man Hanging Man* and *Incommunicado*, Robert Gober and Mona Hatoum both appear to address the hider with his eyelids clenched. They evoke a sense of epiphany, like the one experienced by the Buddha upon leaving the palace gates, using domesticity as a platform for commenting about broader issues of comfort and security. In post-industrialized societies it is exceedingly easy for knowledge to be foreclosed or imprisoned by comfort.

There, There (Culling Comfort) is intended to question the way we isolate ourselves, raising the bulwark for resisting a tidal surge of uncertainty that encourages empathy's atrophy. Physical boundaries devised as protection from an impervious, unknowable menace readily evolve into psychological boundaries circumscribing our notions of what is possible. Comfortable with comfort, our anxieties are soothed by the familiar, consoled by limited interaction with anything beyond the constriction of a self-constructed porthole. Whenever comfort colludes with antipathy, it assists in transforming us all into refugees of possibility.

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